

TESTIMONY
to
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER
AND POWER
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
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University of Texas at Brownsville
and
Texas Southmost College

INTRODUCTION

My name is Kenneth N. Jones, Jr., Executive Director of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC). The LRGVDC is the Regional Council of Governments representing the three (3) southernmost counties in Texas: Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. The LRGVDC is a voluntary association of local governments created in 1967 to deal with the regional planning needs that cross the boundaries of individual local governments, and this is accomplished through cooperative action by Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy counties. The LRGVDC provides an effective link between both federal and state government programs and the cities and counties where people are served. Membership in the LRGVDC include cities, counties, school districts, educational institutions, special purpose districts and others. The LRGVDC has more than 35 years of experience and performance in intergovernmental cooperation.

My testimony today will focus on the extensive planning that has taken place in the region to address water supply needs, and to provide supporting documentation as to the critical importance and urgent need for the passage of H.R. 2990.

REGIONAL WATER PLANNING EFFORTS

1995 - 2002

In late 1995 at the conclusion of the hurricane season, it became painfully evident that inflows into the Amistad and Falcon Reservoir system were continuing to decline with no relief in sight. As reservoir levels were rapidly approaching the lowest levels since the construction of Falcon Dam in the late 1950's ,water rights holders within this region rallied together to assess the situation and determine the next steps that

should be taken.

Through these initial meetings and deliberations, a general consensus was reached that a comprehensive water supply plan was needed to evaluate the current and projected water supply situation for all water users and provide recommendations for meeting the water supply demands for the region.

As support expanded for the development of this water supply plan, the LRGVDC was successful in 1997 to secure federal, state and local funding to prepare an "Integrated Water Resource Plan" (IWRP) for Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. To guide this process, a Policy Management Committee was created comprising representatives of municipal, agricultural, industrial, private and environmental interests. This planning process was successfully completed in February 1999 with final Plan approval by the Region. Recommendations cited for immediate action included the following:

- •The Irrigation Canal System must be improved to reduce the transmission losses to the maximum extent possible.

Justification - The irrigation canal system delivers untreated water to both irrigators and domestic customers throughout most of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The study revealed significant water losses in this aging delivery system. Also, the full benefit of the on-farm water savings cannot be achieved without these canals improvements. A program to reduce these losses will provide a greater quantity of water for beneficial use.

- •Economic incentives must be established to encourage irrigators to implement on-farm water conservation measures such as, metering, poly or gated pipe and drip or micro jet systems and to provide education to receive maximum benefit.

Justification - Since approximately 85% of the current water consumption in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is in agricultural production, water conservation will have a significant impact. Additionally, agricultural economics is marginal for many crops produced.

- •An enhanced region-wide municipal and industrial water conservation program must be established.

Justification - Water conservation programs have been adopted by many of the municipalities and water supply corporations. The "Water Smart" program has been pursued Valle-wide.

- •A region-wide water accounting system must be established to permit the accurate measurement of the efforts of implementation of water conservation projects.

Justification - In the development of the technical analysis for these recommendations, a number of water related data sets available from sources in the Valley and at the State level were reviewed and utilized. In many cases, inconsistencies were noted between the data sets and the level of accuracy was inadequate. To measure water conservation actions recommended, a reliable and complete region-wide water accounting system is needed.

As the region's IWRP process was getting underway, there was also a statewide drought occurring. During 1997, the 75th Texas Legislature enacted Senate Bill 1 (SB 1). S.B. 1 established a "grass roots" approach to plan for the State's future water supply. This approach called for the preparation of regional water plans by appointed Regional Water Planning Groups (RWPG's). The IWRP process took place during the development of the S.B. 1 legislation which incorporated many aspects of the Lower Rio Grande Valley's

planning efforts.

The Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group (RGRWPG) for Region "M", is one of 16 local bodies established by the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB). The RGRWPG consists of 19 voting members representing 10 of the 11 interest group categories specified in S.B. 1. Only one category was excluded which is, river authorities, since no river authority exists in this region. The RGRWPG also consists of non-voting members representing federal and state agencies and Mexican representatives.

Eight counties are represented within the RGRWPG which are: Cameron, Hidalgo,, Jim Hogg, Maverick, Starr, Webb, Willacy and Zapata Counties. The objectives of these regional water plans was to assess future water demands against current and projected water supplies and include specific recommendations for meeting identified water needs through the year 2030, and longer term needs through the year 2050. The Regional Plan was adopted by the RGRWPG in December of 2001 and adopted by the TWDB in April 2002.

The RGRWPG Plan noted five (5) Water Management Goals to meet the region's water supply needs. These goals are:

- •Optimize the supply of water available from the Rio Grande;
- •Minimize irrigation shortages through the implementation of agricultural water conservation measures and other measures;
- •Reduce projected municipal water supply needs through expanded water conservation programs;
- •Diversify water supply sources for domestic, municipal and industrial (DMI) uses through the appropriate development of alternative water sources (e.g., reuse of reclaimed water, groundwater and desalination;
- •Recognize that the acquisition of additional Rio Grande water supplies will be the preferred strategy of many DMI users for meeting future water supply needs.

As it is clearly noted in the recommendations of the RGRWPG Plan and the earlier IWRP, priority emphasis is placed upon improving infrastructure in both the water conveyance systems and on-farm conservation measures. When considering achieving the maximum water yield for every dollar spent, these infrastructure improvements rise to the top. If these Plan recommended improvements are fully implemented, a water savings of approximately 260,000 ac-ft/yr could be achieved which is an amount equivalent to meeting the current raw water DMI needs of Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. These three counties comprise over 80 percent of the total population in the RGRWPG's eight (8) County region. This amount is also approximately equivalent to the additional DMI water demand projected for the year 2050.

In summary, it is clear that H.R. 2990 is in direct support of, and consistent with, the water supply planning that has been conducted for this region. Additionally, H.R. 2290 is crucial to the economic survival of the agricultural community in our Region. Further, this Bill provides for a major step in the implementation of the IWRP and RGRWPG Plans. The drought coupled with Mexico's non-payment of water consistent to meet that country's obligations under the terms of the 1944 Treaty, heightens the urgency for approval of H.R. 2990. As a region we have united to access our water supply needs, to set priorities and to complete the plans. Now, as a region, we are seeking your support for H.R. 2990 to take a positive step towards Plan

implementation.

Thank You.

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